

SCENE

SIDETRACKS

Bill Kerth, whose father opened Iceland Arena 50 years ago, owns the Del Paso Heights rink now. Kerth remembers the days when it was designated an emergency morgue during World War II, though it never had to be used for that purpose.



Bee/Adam Jahiel

'I guess I should be retiring instead of working on all these rinks and robots.'

— Bill Kerth, 67

ICELAND

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On its golden anniversary, a part of Sacramento's history stands frozen in time

By Dixie Reid
Bee Staff Writer

BILL KERTH IS sitting on a swivel stool at the counter of the old coffee shop at Iceland Arena, gazing through a curved-glass window. Before him lies the antiquated innards of his ice rink. It could still be the 1940s.

The peeling ceiling of this chilly airplane-hanger of a building is punctuated with an occasionally illuminated fluorescent light. Creaky bleachers rise stiffly up one wall. A young girl quietly maneuvers her shiny blades in and out of the sunlight that's playing softly on the frosty surface. The air carries a distinctly historic mustiness.

Bill Kerth, 67, found his skates just this morning. He hasn't had them on in six years, but he was rarely without them for more than three decades. He usually arrived here by 5:30 in the morning and seldom left before 10:30 at night. He says he taught thousands and thousands of Sacramentans to skate at Iceland.

He glances around the art deco relic — at the old diner door leading out of the coffee shop and the cashier's window that looks like something from a picture show. The place seems barely touched by the passing of 50 years.

"I love it," he says, grinning.

Iceland, at 1430 Del Paso Blvd., celebrates its golden anniversary this weekend with several events, including a rechristening with city officials at 10:30 a.m. today and a \$25-per-person skating party Sunday afternoon to benefit Friends of North Sacramento.

Bill Kerth was 17 when his dad opened the rink Nov. 4, 1940. Next door was the family's American Ice Co., built in 1923. It's still in business, too.

"We were busy in the summer and had all these compressors not being used in the winter," says Kerth. "So my dad opened this ice rink, and that sure changed everything. Instead of working hard in the summer and getting the winter off, we were working hard all year long."

The rink is smaller than regulation size because the Kerths owned a certain amount of land and couldn't get the landowner on the other side to part with any of his property. So they filled as much of their own holdings as they could with ice rink.

ICELAND OPENED with a fair amount of hoopla. The family brought in skaters and dancers from the Bay Area to entertain the thousand or so citizens who came to the big skating party. The night's emcee was Stockton native Elton Rule, who went on to become president of ABC.

"It was really something," Kerth remembers, "but we made a big mistake. The other rink (the Ice Palace in West Sacramento, which closed in 1941) always had wet ice, and we wanted ours real dry. We got the brine temperature too low, though, so we got a big crack an inch wide and the whole length of the rink."

He rubs his hand across his thinning hair and grins. "It was real embarrassing. We filled it with water and packed it down with snow."

Iceland's glory days came soon after, during the second World War.

Gasoline was rationed then, and citizens had to turn in their car's spare tire. So nobody went very far, very often. And the town was full of servicemen, looking for entertainment. Business at the little ice rink has never been better.

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Above: Iceland's grand opening in 1940 drew a crowd of 1,000. Left: Bobby Hubbard, national novice men's champion ice skater in the 1950s. He now teaches at the arena.



Girls From Outer Space, a dance spoof, invaded Iceland in the 1960s.



Sacramento notables do a swing skate revue in the 1950s.



Bill Kerth used a castoff WWII jeep to build Snooky, a contraption to clear loose ice from the rink.

Iceland

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"And we had curtains that came down at night because we had to completely black out the rink. They (the government) were afraid McClellan and Mather would be bombed," Kerth says, and then he chuckles. "This rink was designated as an emergency morgue. In case of attack, they could put the bodies right here on the ice."

Kerth missed out on the glory days. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he joined the Navy and didn't return for six years. He came back to run the place, after his father died in 1947, and to teach figure skating.

Kerth didn't set out to be a skater, but the skating teachers his dad brought in from San Francisco asked for a guaranteed number of students. If the public didn't come forth in great enough numbers, Bill Junior filled out the class.

He met his wife, Jean, at the rink. "I gave her a lesson, and then I chased her until she caught me," he says, grinning impishly. They have six children, all accomplished skaters. Kerth and two of his sons own Adaptive Technologies, where they build artificially intelligent robots. They just completed a lucrative deal with TWA.

The family still owns Iceland but leased it out in 1981 to longtime Iceland regulars Bob Kownacki and Chris Lord. Kerth doesn't come by so much anymore, although he still lives and works a few blocks from the glass-brick facade and the shimmering neon.

When Kerth went off to war, the U.S. Navy sent him to electrical engineering school at the University of Oklahoma. Because he had that technical knowledge, and an understanding of ice, he went on to become a consultant on the design construction of ice rinks for a half-dozen Olympic Games.

He's now working on an outdoor rink at Squaw Valley that opens next month and has devised plans for using shaved ice to build fire breaks for forest fires and for creating year-round ski slopes. He's designing a rink for atop the Moscone Center in San Francisco and a portable hockey rink for the Houston Astrodome.

He's a master machinist and a certified welder. He's an avid amateur photographer. He's still working on the 16-inch telescope he started building in 1957. And he's just about finished writing a book on how to teach figure skating.

"The single biggest key is to bend the knees, but you can't tell them that. You have to tell them to push their kneecaps forward," he says, demonstrating.

Kerth takes a seat in a concrete booth in the old coffee shop, next to the glass-brick wall. One of his

AT A GLANCE

Iceland's 50th

Iceland Arena at 1430 Del Paso Blvd. celebrates its 50th anniversary, beginning at 10:30 a.m. today with a rechristening celebration. Other events: Snowman building contest at 10 a.m. Saturday; skating performance and clinic featuring Capital City Skating Club at 1 p.m. Saturday. Prices rolled back Saturday to 50 cents admission, 25 cents skate rental. Ice skating party 3:45 to 5:45 p.m. Sunday, \$25 per person. Information: 442-0957

daughters made the shirt he's wearing, a riot of purple and green. He's set it off with a matching bolo tie.

"The thing that sets Iceland apart is the ice. Ice is a complicated mass of frozen water," he says. "It starts with the pipe spacing below, and they have to be real close together to take out that rippled effect.

"In the old days, I'd scrape the ice by hand and push it off with a broom," he says. "Then I'd put water on it and 'squeegee' it off. It took me three hours, and I'd be dead. So I decided to build me an automatic planer. It was the first in the world. We put it in in 1948 and took it out three years ago."

KERTH CHUCKLES and rubs his hands together. His hazel eyes are bright as ice chips.

"I bought a World War II jeep. It was against the law to do that. I bought it at night and drove it home in the dark. I gave the guy \$500 and away I went. It even had bullet holes in it," he says.

On the jeep's mainframe, Kerth placed a 5-foot-long paper-knife blade (for cutting the ice), a box (to hold the snow) and a tank (to spray water on the newly shaved sheet). He named it a Snooky, for his parents' favorite song. "All night long he called me his snooky-ookums, snooky-ookums," he sings.

"Frank Zamboni and his wife came in one time, and he said he was working on one. He said he was going to sue me. That scared me," he says. "Later on, we became close friends."

Zamboni patented his invention, also built on a jeep base, and became a rich man with it. His ice-resurfacing machines now sell for as much as \$40,000.

Bill Kerth never pursued a patent on his contraption. "I was too busy and then with six kids . . ." he says. One of Frank Zamboni's machines now sits at the far end of Iceland.

Kerth shrugs his shoulders. He's got to get back to work at the robot factory. "I guess I should be retiring instead of working on all these rinks and robots," he says, laughing heartily. "But I guess I will die working."